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ABSTRACT

Too often, many adult educators are unaware of the problems resulting from failing to maintain an appropriate "professional distance" from their adult basic education (ABE) or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students when those students encounter personal problems or crises that appear to be interfering with their learning. ABE teachers should avoid becoming involved in students' personal problems for several reasons; for example, teachers may not be trained appropriately to deal with students' issues. Furthermore, students cannot learn appropriate professional/cultural role definitions unless teachers maintain their designated roles with students. ABE should adhere to the following guidelines in their relationships with students: know their own personal vulnerabilities; understand that their relationship with students is temporary; know professional standards for behaving toward students; recognize the messages conveyed to students by touch, language, and self-disclosure; express their expectations; know students' understanding about interpersonal intera tion; understand cultural differences in role expectations; assess the appropriate use of names; recognize messages conveyed by dress; and know the resources available for referral and the procedures for referring students to resources/services. (MN)

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Maintaining "Professional Distance": A Dilemma for the ABE Teacher

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The following article is intended to be relevant to both Adult Basic Education teachers and to teachers of English as a Second Language. The abbreviation "ABE teacher" will be used to cover both categories of teachers.

Most Adult Basic Education (ABE) teachers enter the field because they are caring individuals who wish to help others. Too often, they are not aware of the problems of maintaining an appropriate "professional distance" when faced with personal problems or crises which they may encounter with their adult students. This is an especially pertinent issue when the personal problems of the student are perceived to interfere with that student's learning.

The purposes of this article are to raise awareness of the dilemmas ABE teachers may face, to recognize the training that others in the helping professions receive to help prepare them for these role conflicts, and to provide ten rules for maintaining appropriate professional distance.

"Professional distance" means that the teacher, as the professional, maintains a "space" between the teacher and the student, a space in which the teacher does not attempt to solve personal problems belonging to the student. The concept of professional distance is a primary focus in the training of helping professionals. School counselor and teacher education training programs, for example, use professional codes of ethics – which define the professional relationship as caring, but not personal or friendly and certainly not "intimate" – as a guide for discussing the nature of the counselor-student or teacher-student relationship both in didactic classes and clinical coursework. Because of the growth of litigation in the past ten years that has challenged the very nature of interactions with students, counselors and teachers are generally cautioned about touching students in any way, socializing outside of the school setting, or engaging in a therapeutic relationship without written permission of the parents. However, Adult Basic Education teachers, while they may be aware of the professional distance between elementary or secondary student and teacher or counselor, may not understand that the same "rules" apply to the adult student.

The ABE teacher often faces the situational dilemma of not having a counseling support staff at the ABE site. Thus, the ABE teacher may be the only professional available to the student in a time of personal need or crisis. When a high school teacher confronts a student's difficult personal problems, there is usually a school counselor or school psychologist to turn to for support and referral. The high school teacher, therefore, can more easily maintain a professional distance, staying in the role of teacher only. The counselor maintains professional distance also; the counselor, though by the definition of the role may discuss personal issues, does not become the student's "friend." Since the discussion of personal issues is often seen as a basis for friendship, the counselor, possibly *more* than the teacher, must constantly be aware of the professional boundaries.

The ABE teacher is also aware of the impact of personal problems on the learning experience. Thus, any attempt on the part of the teacher to alleviate personal problems to enhance learning could be seen as positive both by the teacher and the student. As the professional in the ABE classroom, the teacher wants to be warm, helping and nurturing to the students. But the teacher must recognize the dangers to both the teacher and the student in too intimate a relationship, and must work to establish a climate appropriate for the teaching and learning process to move forward.

There are at least four reasons for the teacher to avoid becoming involved in the personal problems of adult students:

- The teacher may not be appropriately trained to deal with the student's issues. Attempting to engage in discussion or problem-solving of personal issues can lead to the teacher feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. Few ABE teachers are trained to deal with alcohol, drug, or physical abuse, for example, common personal issues with the adult student.

- The teacher has been employed to be a teacher of specific skills and information, and non-teaching tasks may not be within the job description.

- The student deserves to have the professional assistance the student may need from professional counselors and community agency programs that are equipped to serve adults with specific needs.

- The student does not learn appropriate professional/cultural role defi-

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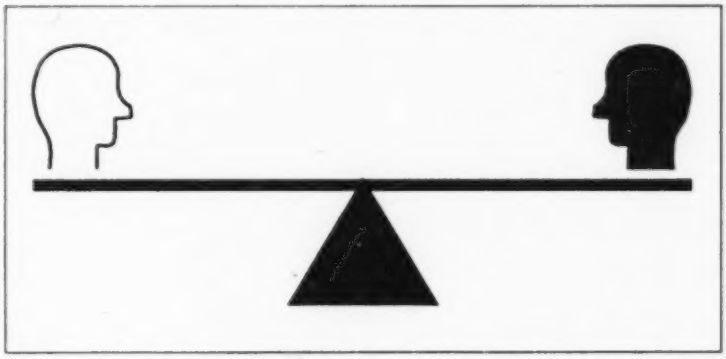
nitions: part of the responsibility of the teacher is to reflect the nature of the larger society. Students need models to learn appropriate behaviors within specific roles. If the teacher, for example, is both evaluator and friend, the understanding by the student of who "teacher" is and how a teacher acts is clouded. The ABE teacher is modeling appropriate work roles to students both in the dominant culture in which roles are often diffused and to students from cultures where roles are more strictly defined.

To assist the ABE teacher in understanding how to set up and maintain professional distance with adult students, the following guidelines are offered with the strong caveat that maintaining professional distance does not mean that the teacher should not care about the student nor should the teacher not express that he or she cares about the student. The intent of the guidelines is that the teacher convey to the student that caring means doing what the teacher is trained to do-teach – and that caring also means that, when necessary, the teacher also refers the student to professionals trained to assist the student in the most appropriate manner.



Ten Guidelines For Maintaining Professional Distance

1) *Know your own personal vulnerabilities, "shadows," unmet needs, motivations, expectations of yourself and others, that are specific to the helping/teaching role.* Teachers certainly enjoy the confidences and appreciation they get from their students, but the line between warmth and developing a co-dependent relationship with the resulting ego-satisfaction to the teacher must be recognized and avoided.

2) *Understand that this is a temporary relationship.* To allow the student to perceive the teacher as a friend implies a permanent relationship, a commitment that neither the teacher nor the student may want to make.

3) *Know professional standards for behavior toward students.* Most institutions have guidelines for out-of-class contact. Know the expectations of your organization.

4) *Recognize the messages you are conveying to your students by touch, language, and your self-disclosure.* Familiar language and touching may be perceived as signals to a more personal relationship. Self-disclosure can be seen as a forerunner to a personal relationship.

5) *Express expectations.* The teacher can make clear what the time boundaries are, where the learning will take place, specifically what the teacher will do, and what is expected of the student in the learning relationship.

6) *Know students' understanding about interpersonal interaction.* Recognize that students often feel they have established personal relationships if they share personal information, if familiar language is used.

7) *Understand cultural differences in the expectations of roles across cultures.* Laughing and joking between men and women may be considered normal here, but is not appropriate in some cultures.

8) *Assess the appropriate use of names.* First names and nicknames may give an inappropriate and unintended sense of intimacy. To some older adults, the use of first names is considered a sign of a lack of respect.

9) *Recognize that dress conveys a number of messages.* A very casual appearance may be interpreted as a message that the educational process is not a serious endeavor. Dress that some consider normal may be considered extremely provocative to people from other backgrounds and cultures. We are trying to get many ABE students ready for success in the world of work. For the instructor, the classroom is the professional setting. Clothing should reflect a professional appearance.

10) *Know the resources available for referral and know how to refer students to them.* Have a phone list available to you at all times. Spend the time making contact for the student, and make sure that the student knows how to proceed. Check back with the student to see that services are being received, but don't take on the burden of "delivering the service." For example, if alcohol abuse in the family is a root problem, know about AA, Alanon, Alateen, and other sources of family treatment. Know specific addresses and guidelines of shelters where someone in an abusive situation can be sent.

In summary, consider that the role of the Adult Basic Education teacher is to facilitate the learning process for the student. Attention, time, and effort should be spent on teaching and learning. That is the need that brought the student to the ABE classroom.